

Comic Realities

Wonder Woman is wandering the world, minus her magic powers, as the quintessential women's liberationist. Lois Lane, spurned by Clark Kent for 32 years, has transformed herself into a black woman and now taunts Superman: "Will you marry me? Just as I am?" The Green Lantern has forsaken his familiar galaxy to do battle with earthly problems. And the Lantern's sidekick, a Robin-Hood-styled crusader named Green Arrow, recently told off a city manager in unmistakably up-to-date terms: "Man, you *are stupid!* Look—in some cities the air is so foul that *breathing* is the equivalent of smoking two packs of cigarettes . . . *Lake Erie's* so polluted, there's virtually no marine life left . . . Mister, the *earth* is in *trouble!*"

For aficionados of the classic comic book—fantasists who prefer their superheroes relentlessly irrelevant and implacably mindless—these are hard times. The mighty men and women of the medium are still faster than speeding bullets and more powerful than locomotives. But they are increasingly assailed by waves of existential doubt and are tormented far more by today's social realities than they ever were by the mad machinations of superscientists and mischievous monsters. Sad to relate, the entire U.S. superhero industry—which consists mainly of DC Comics (publishers of "Batman," the "Green Lantern" and the family of "Superman") and the Marvel Comics Group (creators of the "Spider-Man" and "Captain America," among others)—has taken an improbable plunge into relevance and social realism.

Slump: Behind the comic-book industry's flight from escapism lies a variety of factors: competition from television, growing reader sophistication and the cumulative effect of decades of denunciation by parents, psychologists, teachers and preachers. By the late 1960s, a combination of all of these forces had sent comic-book sales slumping. Indeed, two years ago business reached such a low ebb at DC Comics—a part of the Kinney conglomerate and the purveyor of 140 million of the 300 million comic books sold annually throughout the world—that one of its leading lights, the "Green Lantern," was about to fold. With just six issues remaining, recalls DC editorial director Carmine Infantino, the decision was made to "come down hard on the social issues." When the first number of the revamped "Green Lantern" hit the newsstands last winter, fan mail quadrupled within a week. Sales began to rise and soon the "Green Lantern"—featuring such zappy forays into relevance as "In the heart of America—A war zone!" and "The Population Explosion!"—was again turning a substantial profit.

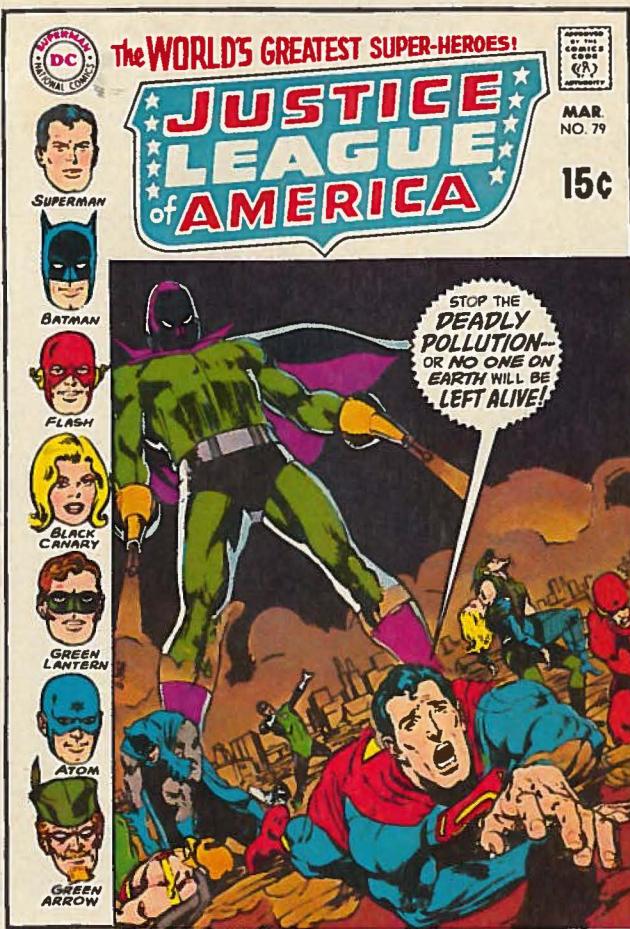
Quick to follow the trend to campy social commentary were the other heroes



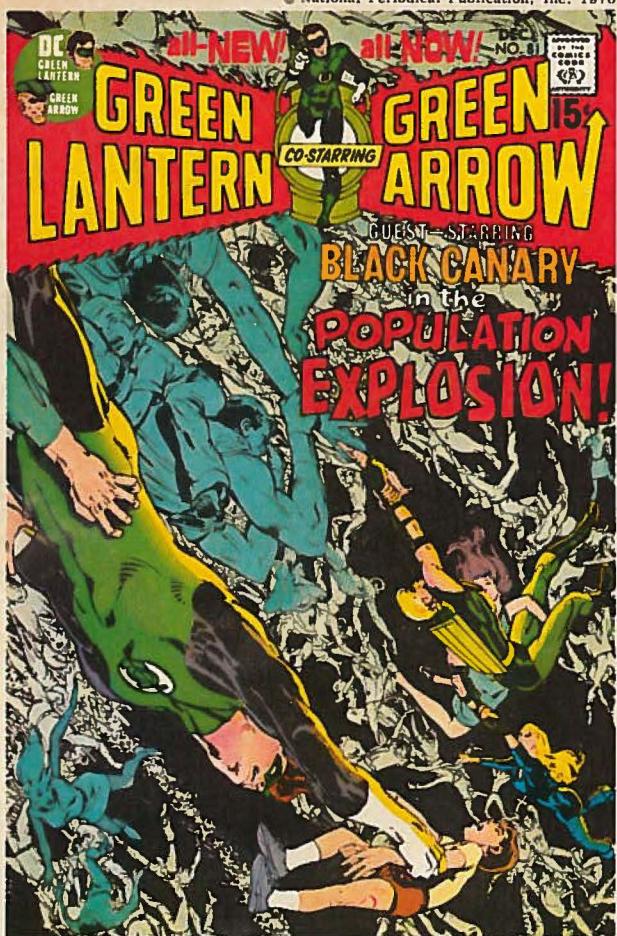
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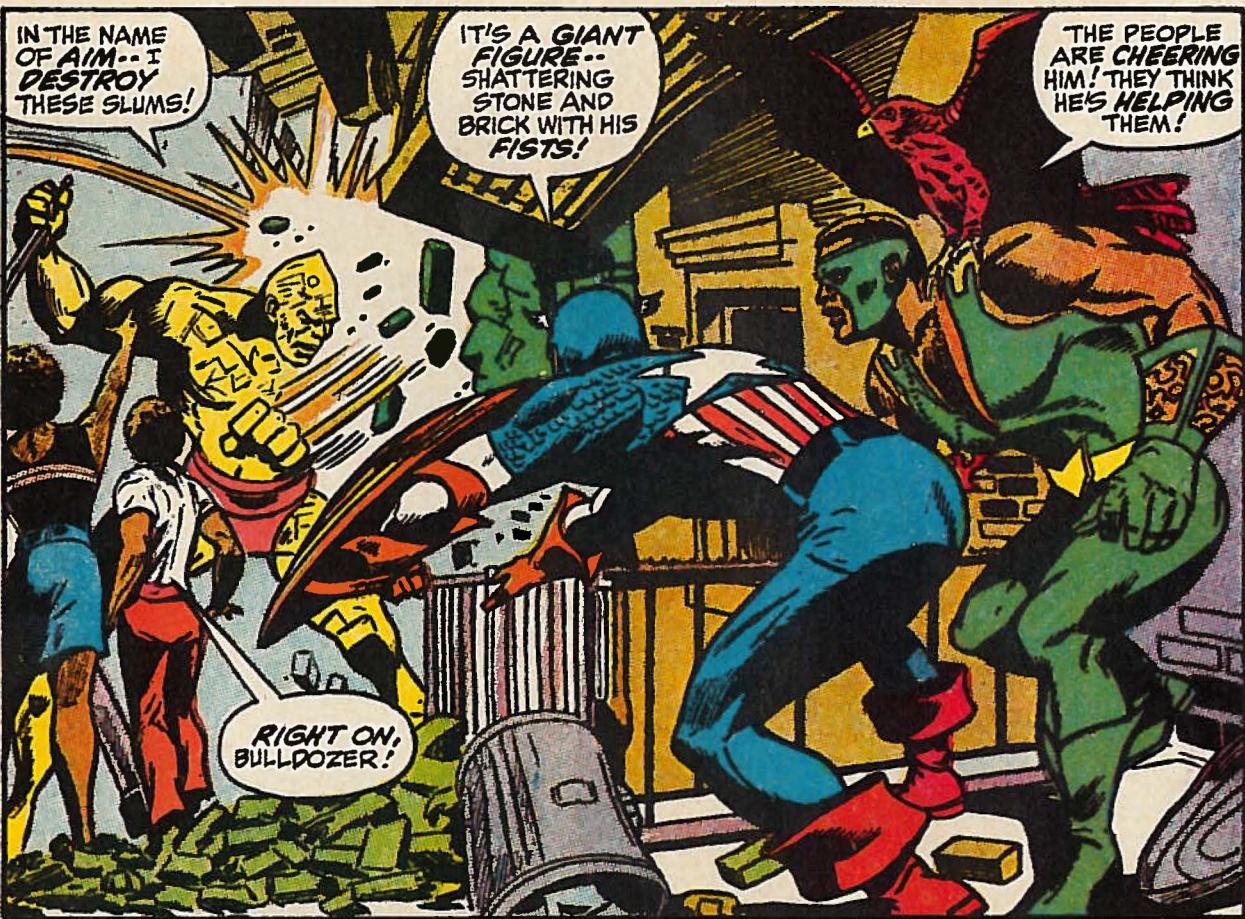
ZAP! In hot pursuit of relevance and profit, many superhero comic books have abandoned pure escapism for such contemporary themes as women's lib (top left), pollution, overpopulation and race relations

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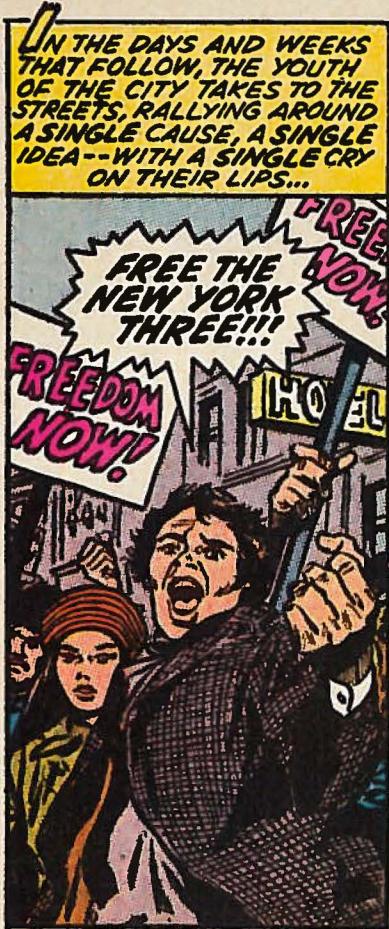
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A nefarious urban-demolition scheme by the evil 'Aim' (above) challenges 'Captain America's' new sidekick, a black man called the Falcon who lives in Harlem with his winged namesake. A 'Daredevil' comic (below) echoes the attitudes of youthful dissidents toward recent U.S. 'political' trials.

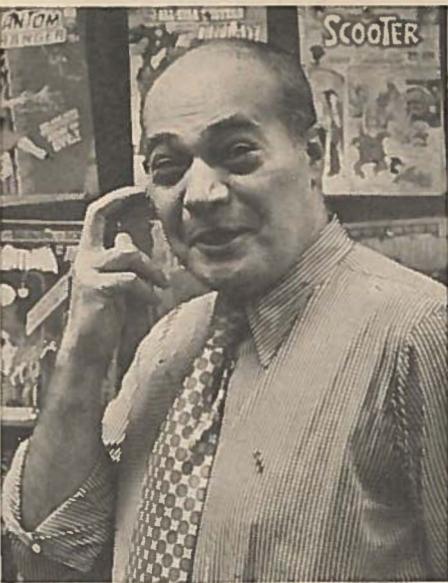


in the DC stable, and now, in the next issue of "Superman," even the mighty master of Metropolis will lose the cosmic immortality conferred upon him as a native of the planet Krypton and become a bit more like everyman. "In 1938, the world wanted a superman," explains Carmine Infantino. "But people don't worship icons any more and, in 1970, Superman wants to live like a human being—but he still can't have a wife or family. He must remain a loner and this is what kids are feeling today. They want to be a part of things—but can't."

At Marvel, which sells 48 million books a year and thus plays Avis to DC's Hertz in the highly competitive comic business, editor Stan Lee is quick to boast that his team beat DC into the reality bag by a country mile. Fully ten years ago, Lee notes, Marvel brought out the "Fantastic Four" in a bid to make superheroes less perfect and more believable. "We even tried to make our villain human," he says. "He might still love his mother, or give a blind beggar a nickel."

Fans: Today, flirting with variations on the Manson cult, the Chicago Seven trial and other modish themes, Marvel and DC together consistently generate almost 2,000 fan letters a week from youngsters, young adults (Marvel estimates that 40 per cent of its superhero comic-book readers are college age or older) and even college professors. Comics have also become a well-entrenched part of the turned-on underground culture and even such sophisticates as directors Federico Fellini and Alain Resnais (for whom Lee plans to write a movie script) are avid followers.

For such readers, of course, comic books are anything but a laughing matter. And the same is true for their publishers; this year the industry expects to top 1969's \$50 million gross by several million. And, as a further dividend, comic books have become infinitely more respectable. With some teachers already making extensive use of comics in the classroom, DC is forging ahead with plans for a venture in educational materials. And that, even for a business accustomed to hurdling tall buildings in a single bound, is quite a leap.



Robert R. McElroy—Newsweek

Infantino: Campy commentary